



GUEST OPINION ARTICLE

For Immediate Release:
Feb. 3, 2010

For More Information, Contact:
L. David Glatt
North Dakota Department of Health
Phone: 701.328.5150
E-mail: dglatt@nd.gov

State Working To Protect Valley City, As Well As Devils Lake

We would like to address a number of points made in a recent editorial in the Valley City Times Record regarding the state's efforts to manage Devils Lake flooding. First and foremost, we want to make clear that the state of North Dakota is committed to protecting the interests of Valley City, as well as Devils Lake.

Various state agencies have dedicated considerable time informing numerous federal agencies, local officials and the public about issues related to Devils Lake flooding and operation of the outlet. These include the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, U.S. Department of State, the White House Council on Environmental Quality, Canadian officials and many others.

At the local level, the North Dakota Department of Health has provided information to city representatives from both Devils Lake and Valley City; conducted several public hearings in Devils Lake, Valley City and Bismarck; and participated in a local public health board meeting and an open public forum in Valley City. Information on the Devils Lake outlet also can be found on the Department of Health and State Water Commission web pages.

More than \$800 million of state and federal funds have been spent in recent years on storing more water in the upper basin, raising and protecting infrastructure, and building an outlet. Since 1993, Devils Lake has risen more than 27 feet – 3.8 feet last year alone – and together with Stump Lake, has grown from 49,000 acres to more than 160,000, inundating homes, businesses and farms. Today the lake is within just 8 feet of an uncontrolled release of the poorest quality, high-sulfate water from the east end, and it is forecasted to set a new record high this year again. You can only imagine the damaging impacts this would have on the Sheyenne River and downstream water users.

The state's objective with the west-end outlet is to minimize or avoid the possible effects of a catastrophic uncontrolled spill into the Sheyenne River by managing releases to mitigate impacts on downstream beneficial water users. To assist in managing the Devils Lake outlet, an advisory committee was established by North Dakota Century Code Chapter 61-36-01. This 10-member committee includes state, county and tribal representatives. The committee develops an annual outlet operating plan, which considers factors such as spring runoff, flooding potential, downstream impacts on water quality and stream bank erosion.

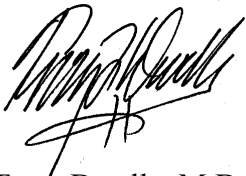
From the headwaters of the Sheyenne to Baldhill Dam, the proposed standard of 750 parts per million (ppm) of sulfates is protective of aquatic life, as well as recreational and agricultural uses. The water quality standard of 450 ppm for the Sheyenne from Baldhill Dam to the Red River – including Valley City – has not changed. This standard was established by the state and approved by the Environmental Protection Agency. The state also continues to routinely conduct complete chemical analyses of Devils Lake and the Sheyenne and Red rivers. Bear in mind that our stream sulfate standard is lower than the Canadian drinking water sulfate aesthetic objective of 500 ppm.

In 1999, the EPA and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention published the results of a joint study and workshop examining potential health effects from exposure to sulfate in drinking water. The experts could find no studies that conclusively showed an increase in diarrhea, dehydration or weight loss associated with sulfate levels. They concluded that there is not enough scientific evidence on which to base a sulfate-level regulation, but panelists conservatively favored a health advisory in places where drinking water has sulfate levels of more than 500 ppm, higher than the stream standard for the Sheyenne River.

The North Dakota Department of Health and the State Water Commission have been working closely with the community of Valley City not just to mitigate the possibility of a major flood, but to improve Valley City's water supply system. The awarding of more than \$12 million in funding to the project last summer is a clear signal from the state that the interests of Valley City are important and will be protected.

The plan the state has developed with Valley City will result in a \$15.6 million modern water purification system with reverse osmosis technology. Currently, the city's water is treated in a conventional lime-softening treatment plant that does not remove sulfates and minerals. The new facility will remove sulfates and other dissolved minerals, resulting in significantly higher water quality than the community's existing water treatment plant now provides. Moreover, the plan meets both the city's immediate and future needs.

North Dakotans have always been willing to work together for the greater good of our state. The very real possibility of an uncontrolled release in Devils Lake makes clear that flooding in that area of our state is not just a Devils Lake problem or a Valley City problem – it is a North Dakota problem, and we must all work together to solve it. We believe we have arrived at a practical and reasonable solution that protects and respects all interests.



Terry Dwelle, M.D.
State Health Officer
North Dakota Department of Health



Todd Sando
Assistant State Engineer
Director of Water Development
North Dakota State Water
Commission

L. David Glatt
Chief, Environmental Health
Section
North Dakota Department
of Health